

ROADSIDE SKETCHES

What a Pedestrian Can See in the Vicinity of Arlington

Reminders of Past Days

Analostan Island and the Old Mason Mansion — The Famous Custis Spring
— A Walk to Alexandria by Way of the Towpath — Hunter's Cross Roads
and Ballston

Analostan Island (known to old timers as Mason's Island) is the delightful outing home of the Columbia Athletic Club. Arriving at Georgetown, proceed to the foot of 32nd Street; the boat house of the club is located at this point, whence row boats carry people to and from the island. The privileges of the grounds are confined to members of the club, but respectable outsiders will, I think find no difficulty in obtaining permission to visit them. The grounds are admirably arranged for outdoor sports of all kinds — baseball, tennis, sprinting, etc. The island is well adapted to the purpose and the club is one of the largest and most popular organizations in the city, embracing in its active membership many popular young men and leading citizens.

To the visitor the island, which contains about seventy acres, presents numerous attractive features, historical as well as scenic, and a walk around its classic shores will prove highly interesting.

It was a long time the home of the Masons, (being known as "Mason's Island" in those days), an historic Virginia family. At the southern end are the ruins of the old mansion (destroyed during the civil war), under whose roof in the olden time many select entertainments were given. Some important conferences were held here in the old colonial days by leaders of the people's cause. Gen. George Mason frequently had George Washington as his guest. The unfortunate Louis Phillippe of France was his guest in 1798. In the anxious days preceding the Civil War leading secessionists were invited here by the then proprietor, James M. Mason, grandson of the revolutionary hero, to discuss and formulate their plans. It is said that Robert E. Lee of Arlington House, who afterward became the famous confederate leader, was induced to attend more than one of those conferences. During Gen. George Mason's time the island was kept in a high state of cultivated attractiveness. David B. Warden, an old chronicler, writing about it in 1810, designates it "an enchanting spot."

The Old Causeway

The old dilapidated causeway which connects the upper end of the island with the main island was constructed pursuant to a contract entered into March 23, 1805, between Gen. George Mason and the corporation of

Georgetown and was intended to serve a double purpose, viz: First, to increase the depth of water in the river channel, and secondly, for use in connection with a ferry which Gen. Mason was to run between Georgetown and the Virginia side, by way of the island. This was nearly forty years before the construction of the old Aqueduct bridge. Gen. Washington, when visiting Georgetown, used this ferry.

At the outbreak of the Civil War the then owner of the island, James M. Mason, going south and espousing the cause of the confederacy, the national government took possession of it and converted it into a camp for contrabands and refugees.

West of Little River and the old canal stood old Fort Haggerty in war times and the abandoned earthworks could even now be discerned from the island were it not for the weeds and underbrush which surround them.

The variety of wild flowers found on the island is both large and select and the notes of the song bird are ever heard here.

Along the Canal to Alexandria

Reaching the southern end of the Aqueduct or Georgetown bridge at Rosslyn, bear to the left along the towpath of the canal. The first object to attract one's attention is the half covered dilapidated causeway on the left which connects Analostan Island with the Virginia shore. Near the southern end of the island, not far from the ruins of the old Mason mansion, is another old broken causeway, which has been allowed to go into decay. Arbutus Brook enters Little River near here. A little further on is Lily Pond, on the right from which point, looking west, a good view is had of the Arlington mansion. Passing Lily Pond you will notice in a cluster of trees to the right an old log building. This was a slave habitation in the old days. A little further on, to the left, is the entrance to a path which leads down the bank to Custis Spring. The water of this famous spring is found to be as sweet today as it was in the halcyon days of its popularity, but the surroundings are altogether different. The beeches, oaks, and sycamores, whose tall spreading branches overshadowed it, are no longer visible, for they were felled during the war period. In their stead nature has provided for its shelter a second growth of young trees, chief among which is a sprightly aspen, the incessant fanning motion of whose leaves impart a feeling of coolness on the hottest day.

Once a Famous Resort

The spring was once a favorite resort of the Masons, the Custises, the Washingtons, the Lees and hosts of Washingtonians and others. Jolly old farmer George Washington Parke Custis (an adopted son of Washington),

who was the owner of the Arlington estate, and who was an enthusiastic fiddler, erected a dancing pavilion in the midst of what was then a charming grove, where the belles and the beaux of the neighborhood would assemble of evenings and “tip (sic) the light fantastic” to the music of Mr. Custis’ merry old fiddle. The old gentleman, seated in a huge rustic chair, in shirt sleeves and with a broad-brimmed straw hat shading his kindly features, would rattle off the favorite airs of the period for hours at a time, to the great delight of the assembled friends and neighbors. And tradition hath it that the virgin water of the spring was not the only fluid imbibed on those happy occasions.

The spring is even now held in veneration by the people living in the vicinity, who take good care of it and use the water freely.

It is related of Braddock and Washington that they halted here on their way to Fort Duquesne and filled their canteens from the spring. And at the foot of old Observatory Hill, across the river yonder, near 25th street is Braddock rock, where the flotilla of barges from Alexandria landed the British army under Braddock in 1754.

Observatory Hill is also known as “Camp Hill” from the fact that in 1814 part of the little American army camped on it before marching to meet the British on the inglorious field of Bladensburg.

Back of the spring runs a wagon road (Overseer’s by-road), which leads through the culvert and across the fields to the Georgetown and Alexandria road, which it enters at the southeast gate of Arlington National Cemetery. A short distance west of the culvert once, and until lately, stood the old house made of English bricks, which in slave days was the residence of the overseer of the Arlington estate. The building, which was a landmark, was torn down last year [1890]. The foundation and some of the debris are yet to be seen. In the cluster of trees by the roadside in the vicinity are a number of old slave cabins.

In The Brick-Yard Region

Resuming the walk along the canal you soon cross the Columbia turnpike and are in the midst of the brick yards for which this neighborhood is famous. Fort Runyon, Waterloo Station, Brick Haven and Four-Mile Run are passed in the order named.

Arriving at Alexandria one can either walk back to Washington by way of the Washington and Alexandria road or return by rail or ferry boat.

The seven miles of canal along which this walk extends was constructed in 1848 and cost \$500,000. It was abandoned as a waterway several years ago.

This is a charming walk in springtime or autumn. The path is secluded, passing along the river bottom through a variety of scenery, wild flowers

and plants being abundant. Some few obstacles may be encountered in the way of fences, but they can be easily overcome.

The buses and shrubs along the pathsides are frequented by a variety of birds, conspicuous among them being the lively, sweet-voiced hedge sparrow. Indeed, this firstling of spring is first encountered here, and his cherry notes, emitted at short intervals, are most pleasing, breaking as they do, the long winter silence. The quizzing chat is also a frequenter of these thickets, as well as the wood thrush, the thrasher, the cat and other famous wood-land vocalists.

The upper end of this walk, between Rosslyn and Columbia road, ought to be popular with the women of Washington. It is easy access, the pathway is hard and smooth and reasonably free from dust, and there is plenty of shade.

Hunter's Cross Roads and Ballston

Route — Crossing the Georgetown bridge to Rosslyn, the Georgetown and Alexandria road is taken, thence by said road to Columbia road, to Hunter's Chapel road, to Ballston road, to Rosslyn.

Condition of the roads — Georgetown and Alexandria road: Bad; hilly and uneven. Columbia road: Fair. Ballston road: Fair.

Arriving at Rosslyn by way of the Georgetown bridge take the Georgetown and Alexandria road by turning sharply to the left, around the southeast corner of Clark's restaurant. The old canal, now overgrown with weeds, is on your left.

You are presently on the spot where the saucy guns of old Fort Haggerty once pointed southward, but the ground is now so transformed as to leave little trace of this once formidable earthwork.

Arbutus Brook is soon crossed, just beyond being the north limit of the Arlington estate. Inside the north gate, which is soon reached, is the oldest part of Arlington National Cemetery. As the main entrance to the cemetery is approached Oak Brook is crossed, its waters running eastward to the Potomac. Opposite the south gate of the cemetery, which you soon reach, is the entrance to Overseer byroad, which leads along the fields and through the culvert of the old canal. A little north of the eastern end of the culvert is the famous Custis spring.

A short distance from the southern gate and you are across Holly Brook. Near here, on an eminence to the right, sheltered by a fine grove, is Mount Olivet Colored Baptist Church.

Entering the Columbia road near this point, move to the right along said road through the straggling village of Arlington. The road passed on the right as you move through the village is McPherson road, and it runs along

the western wall of Arlington Cemetery, connecting with Fort Myer and Cemetery road at the west gate.

Looking south as you advance the ridge upon which old Fort Richardson stood in war time is quite conspicuous. Trinity Episcopal Chapel, a neat little frame building, is noticed on the right.

The village post office is soon passed on the right, on the same side a short distance beyond being Columbia School. The members of Hunter's Chapel Methodist Church worship in this building, which was erected soon after the war from lumber used in one of the barracks over at Convalescent Camp, and which was presented to the society by Gen. Howard.

The earthworks of Old Fort Craig are visible over to the right, which leads through the fields over to Hunter's Chapel road.

The Chapel

Hunter's Cross Roads is presently reached, which is two and a half miles from the Long Bridge and about the same distance from the Georgetown bridge. In the northeastern angle formed by the roads once stood Hunter's Methodist Episcopal Chapel, which was built about the year 1856 and was destroyed in 1862. A Mrs. Hunter, who owned a large tract of land in the vicinity, donated the ground upon which the church stood. Mrs. Hunter's sympathies were with the south at the outbreak of the war, and a member of her family resigned his commission in the United States navy and went south. The government confiscated her property. The church was also taken possession of early 1861, and was used as a store house for commissary supplies, and as headquarters for the reserve picket guard. The church society now has a claim before Congress for compensation for use and destruction of the property.

Continuing along the Hunter's Chapel road for a couple of miles through a prosperous-looking stretch of farm country you arrive at Ballston, which is two and a half miles from Rosslyn and four miles from Chain Bridge. There are a couple of stores, a post office and a Presbyterian church here. The place is pleasantly situated and the surroundings present evidence of thrift.

The First Cavalry Raid

Perhaps the first cavalry raid of the Civil War was made over the piece of road just traveled. It was in June 1861, before the first Bull Run. The troopers, who, tradition says, were commanded by Mosby, came from the direction of Falls Church, and at Hunter's Cross Roads moved toward Bailey's Cross Roads by way of the Columbia road.

Now return to Rosslyn by the Ballston road, which take to the right.

Ascending the elevated plateau upon which old Forts Corcoran, Morton and Woodbury stood in war time, the vision is treated to a magnificent landscape view. Advancing to the ruined works of the first named fort, from an elevation of 175 feet, you have almost a bird's-eye view of the surrounding country. On the left are the picturesque heights of Georgetown and above, in front is Washington, with its attractive buildings and on the right the Long Bridge and the placid waters of the Potomac, the green hills of Prince George's beyond forming a pleasing background to the charming picture. The hill may be descended by either the main road or by Corcoran Avenue to the left, and you are then in Rosslyn.

If, during bad weather, it is desired to avoid the bad piece of road between Rosslyn and the Columbia road (the first part of this excursion) this substitute is suggested: Proceed by the Fort Myer and Cemetery Road to the west gate of Arlington National Cemetery. Here take McPherson Road, which leads to and enters the Columbia road at the village of Arlington. But entire abandonment of this piece of road, here referred to, is not advised, for any inconveniences experienced from traveling over its rough surface will be more than compensated by the rare botanical attractions that are met with. It runs through the Arlington estate and forms the eastern boundary of the national cemetery.

The above article, written by George Simmons, appeared in *The Evening Star*, Washington, D.C., Saturday, July 4, 1891. It is one of a series titled "Roadside Sketches."



**This publication
has been supported
by a generous contribution
from**

The George and Carol Olmsted Foundation